

March Madness is almost upon us. The NCAA Men's basketball tournament is my favorite sporting event and it begins in less than a week. It all starts with 68 teams, all vying for the right to be called the best team in the land. While some teams are just happy to be there, other programs will consider their season a disappointment if they do not win it all. That's the harsh reality for athletes: there can only be one #1.

We're looking at renewal during this season of preparation, and today we're going to talk about the renewal of priorities. This is a biggie. The spiritual reality for humans is: there can only be one #1 in my heart, and when it's not God, things have a way of self-destructing.

God is never shy about saying that He needs to be #1 in your life. I mean, if you only remember one commandment, it's probably the first: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." Jesus is just being consistent here in Luke 14. He asks you to think about it; to count the cost. Can you do it? Is putting Him first something you want to do?

And somewhere deep in our hearts, we know that this level of commitment is what it takes when it comes to life with Jesus. Even if we can't put it into words, we know God should be #1 in our lives; that our decisions and actions ought to be in harmony with God's #1 spot. It's not that we don't know the right answer. But there are things that we crave, and when our desire for those things takes over, when we pursue those things more than we pursue God, when we bump God out of the top spot to get what we want, it's just a matter of time before things go really bad. That thing becomes a counterfeit god that someday you will lose. Think about that for a second. If you want something more than God, and you get it, that thing becomes an idol that you are guaranteed to lose someday. This is a serious problem of the human heart. It is the root of many of our emotional and psychological struggles. That's why Jesus had to come and demolish it. To do so, He speaks some pretty strong words.

The language Jesus uses here has caused many Christians to just file this away in the section marked, "Let's Pretend Jesus Didn't Actually Say That." Then we don't have to deal with it. When Jesus talks about hating father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters and even your own life, well, we almost make a little mental deal to ignore Jesus and move on to the next point. But Bible scholars tell us that in Hebrew, the word 'hate' can be used as a figure of speech to mean loving someone less than another. You don't hate them in the sense that you despise them; but "hate" in this Hebrew idiom means that there is a pecking order. Both are loved, but there is a favorite. So it would be valid to translate verse 26 this way: "If you want to be my follower you must love me more than your own father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, more than your own life." Now that takes some of the weirdness out of it, but the fact remains that Jesus is forcing a choice. It's not hard to figure out what you love more and what you love less—just look at the decisions you make every day and where you're

spending your time and your money. It's not hard to tell where God is on your list. There can only be one #1.

But what's the deal with that? Does God just have a huge ego or something that he needs to be #1 and control us? Actually, no; Since God created us, he knows how we are properly oriented. Sin is a decision to be disoriented. Sin is, in a spiritual sense, to ignore the operator's manual (and the inventor) and to behave as if I can make this life work by myself. And so we put all kind of things at the number one spot and make them non-negotiables. I have to have success. I have to feel admired. I have to feel like my friends think I'm the best person they've ever known. I have to look young. I have to have enough money to feel comfortable. I have to find my soul mate. On and on it goes, but it's all the same: none of those things can take the weight of the number one spot. Putting them there destroys them, even if they were good things. They were not built to be a God. Putting them there will also destroy you, because you'll do anything to get them, and even if you get them, you'll need more and more of that thing to fill the spot. And then, inevitably, someday, you'll lose it. Do you see? When God says, I need to be your number one, this is what he is trying to save us from. When we put other things first, it disorients us. It dis-orders us. He doesn't want that for me. The point is: Much of the time, my real problem is that my heart is burning for something besides God.

If Jesus' words have hit a nerve with you, then the thing to do is be honest. Be honest about how impossible it seems to put God at #1 in your life. And the renewal you seek will begin, not by trying harder next time, but when you look into the commitment Jesus made to you. That's what is going to melt your heart. That's what is going to win you over, when you see what Jesus' priorities led Him to do.

Jesus loved His Father more than He loved Himself. That's how He could empty himself of all majesty to become truly human. That's how He could be obedient to His Father and carry out the mission that had been given Him.

What's equally true is that Jesus loved you more than He loved himself. That love held Him to the cross, where His total commitment to you resulted in His suffering and death. Because Jesus loves you more than He loves himself, you are spared from having to deal with sin and death on your own; you are spared from eternal separation from God. To use the Hebraic figure of speech, Jesus hated Himself and loved you. Otherwise He would have never gone near the cross. But he did. His love for His Father and His love for you is the only explanation "why." You were His priority. He lost it all to find you. He paid it all to purchase you. What does love like that deserve?